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THE RETURN OF THE REPRESSED

HOMOSEXUALITY IN AMERICAN CULTURE

KATHLEEN M. MISH

What is repressed will eventually return to the surface of consciousness in both one's psychological self and in society. In his essay, "Power and Law in Hawthorne's Fictions," Eric Mottram explores Sigmund Freud's notion of the return of the repressed and applies the concept to a study of society. Mottram focuses on the return of the repressed—mainly sexuality—in Nathaniel Hawthorne's literature, but his theories about repressed sexuality in a fictional world can be applied to our own society. In today's culture, homosexuality is returning to cultural consciousness after a long history of repression.

Homosexuality is not alone in its prolonged repressed state. Mottram recognizes the multiple forms repression has taken in our country. Each represents a taboo in society: "In America the repressed appears as the Indian, the Black Man in the forest, wilderness and wildness, the Devil, uncontrolled libido in any form" (Mottram 227). The uniting factor between these taboos is their manifestation as "uncontrolled libido." A heterosexist society views homosexuality as the ultimate lack of control over one's sexual urges, which originate in the libido. In our homophobic society, homosexuals are often associated with rampant promiscuity. Supposedly, they cannot control their sexual urges and often have sex in public places, such as the infamous public baths in New York City. Society is generally unwilling to accept forms of sexuality which deviate from the ideal controlled, heterosexual norm. Thus homosexuality is depicted as entirely unnatural. In Mottram's words, "What thrusts past the censor, what threatens normality, is presented as monstrous, a villain, the natural threatening state forms" (227). As a result, homosexuals are demonized for their "wild" sexuality and many have had to repress their sexual desires in order to gain acceptance in our culture.

Repression and demonization do not occur arbitrarily. Mottram explains

the motives behind this repression: "so that religious and capitalist relationships can be imposed" (227). Today, religious and economic leaders seem to be the most vocal opponents against homosexuality. Religious leaders use the arguments of "morality" in order to promote their views, which are broadcast through the media. They view sexual relationships as existing rightly only between men and women, an ideal set forth in ancient religious texts. This norm is then imposed upon society through the venue of the pulpit. Any opposing form of sexuality other than that of husband and wife is a direct threat to their heterosexual security. Homosexuality is also threatening to capitalism. The possibility of gay marriage would allow for more tax cuts, benefits given only to married couples. If more Americans were married as a result of legalized gay marriage, then the government would lose a significant amount of money. These religious and political leaders are also worried that same-sex friends will engage in marriages of convenience in order to receive these monetary benefits. The capitalist argument is then tied in with the religious, for the emphasis is not only on the loss of money but on the proposition of a "meaningless" marriage. Thus, our own society continues to associate religious and capitalist arguments with each other.

Homosexuality can indeed overcome the stigmas imposed by religion and capitalism. In his analysis of Hawthorne's fiction, Mottram speaks of the possibility that the formerly repressed revolutionary concept could actually be a positive response to the ordinary and possibly outdated work production of society. This revolution must be recognized in case the concept is actually superior to the former way of life: "The creative/subversive must somehow be given permission: the dilemma of the State" (Mottram 227). The recognition of homosexuality is a natural continuation of the sexual revolution beginning in the 1960's in American culture. As our comfort with sexuality is continually broadened because of this revolution, homosexuality can come to be included within these safe boundaries. The State, however, is still threatened, and the process will prove to be gradual.

Besides the backlash from the State, there are challenges along the way to a complete revolution of cultural consciousness. Mottram recognizes this impediment, stating "nostalgia for a feudal order in hierarchy, a class-structured unity, confronts the new, the forward movement in revolt" (228). Some of the most staunch arguments against gay marriage come from the homosexual community itself, as the gay community may also foster nostalgia for some form of class structure. Attempts to establish the practice of gay marriage are seen as assimilation to the monogamous, lifelong relationships idealized by American religion and society. As the monogamous lifelong relationship is inherently a heterosexual ideal, isn't a campaign for gay marriage simply conforming to the standards already established by those who fight so hard against homosexuality? In the hierarchy of relationships of America, marriage is most definitely placed above all else. Homosexuals can attempt to challenge this hierarchal system rather than simply gain a superior place in the already established hierarchy.

This revolutionary movement may cause a complete and sudden return of homosexuality in all its varieties to social consciousness.

Yet, the return of the repressed may indeed be a slow process if capitalist culture is accepted. Mottram's exploration of self-repression due to nostalgia can be applied to the capitalistic nature of society. Homosexual culture has already become intrinsically entwined with capitalism. Contrary to popular belief, this association is not a positive move towards social acceptance. Instead, by becoming involved in capitalist culture, homosexuals will also become a slave to its demands. For example, the popularity of homosexuals in such television shows as "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" and "Will and Grace" has characterized a certain type of homosexual as socially safe. These homosexuals are upper-class white males, and their social status is emphasized. These men are safe to view from one's home television just as "lipstick lesbians," the ideal gorgeous lesbians worshipped by young heterosexual males, conform to the standards of femininity and do not act as a threat to anyone's sexuality. In order to gain ratings and create revenue, homosexuals must conform to a safe, acceptable, and toned down version of their sexuality. Only then can they gain the favor of the audience. According to Mottram, "the monster created by a society or by and through its invented gods...elicits sympathy because he or she or it is the form of the repressed and oppressed. The illegal becomes a category of necessity and therefore strangely legal" (230). Homosexuals have now reached the position where they can safely be the recipient of sympathy, as long as they become the "safe homosexual." They have created a place for themselves in American society, though this place may not be the ideal or even completely revolutionary social position. The repressed has returned to consciousness, though in limited forms. Homosexuals must continue to repress a part of themselves in order to compete in a capitalist world.

Despite the oppressive nature of the capitalist culture, homosexuality will no longer be repressed completely by other authoritative structures of society. Sexuality cannot be controlled by the government, despite its best efforts. Even Mottram agrees: "Legalistic Nature is the fiction of the Law of the State" (229). The control of homosexuality is a fictional power. In the past, homosexual acts were illegal in many places. Even today, these laws exist in some states, and attempts to revoke them have been futile. Instead, more laws are being created against homosexuality, as seen in the last election in which eleven states voted to ban gay marriage. Homosexuality has definitely found ways to come into social consciousness which are most definitely not safely within the boundaries of the law and will continue to do so despite the best efforts of the government.

Homosexuality has been demonized as a form of uncontrolled libido and repressed by American society. This repression occurs in order to promote religious and capitalistic ideals. But the repressed returns as society progresses. Challenges exist which deter a complete return to social consciousness. These challenges may even stem from within the revolutionary culture itself.

Ultimately, the repressed—in this case, homosexuality—does find a place in American culture, though the struggle to become and remain established is constant.

Works Cited

Mottram, Eric. "Power and Law in Hawthorne's Fictions." Nathaniel Hawthorne: New Critical Essays, ed. A. Robert Lee, London: Vision Press Ltd, 1982.